NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES

April 8, 2019

To the American Bahá'í community
for the Feast of Jalál

Dearly loved Friends,

A member of the American Bahá'í community recently wrote to the Universal House of Justice with a question concerning enrollments and the rate of growth in the United States. The query was made in relation to the individual's service as a delegate to the upcoming Bahá'í National Convention. In response, this National Spiritual Assembly received a very illuminating letter, written on behalf of the Supreme Body and dated March 22, in relation to these issues, and we feel it would be valuable for the entire community to reflect on the guidance provided therein. We are, therefore, pleased to share the content of that letter with you below, redacted only to remove any personal identifiers:

> A delegate can certainly raise at the National Convention the topic of enrollments. However, it is important for you to be prepared to ensure any ensuing consultation is carried out in a constructive manner and in light of the experience unfolding within the framework of the Five Year Plan. When discussed in the abstract, this subject could lead to erroneous assertions about the past as well as fruitless, dichotomous debates that create the appearance of conflict between individual or collective teaching, activities for expansion or those for consolidation, direct or indirect teaching approaches, or one particular method of teaching or another. Consultation at Convention on the topic of enrollments will only be fruitful if it draws upon the practical experience of the friends working in their clusters to determine what has proven to be most effective to date and where the practical challenges lie.
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> For the friends who are sacrificially promoting the imperatives of the Plan, any decline in the number of enrollments is neither an indication of an increase in apathy or inactivity nor want of receptivity in the general population to the Message of Bahá'u'lláh. Rather, declarations alone do not provide a sufficient measure of the progress of the Faith in your country or the level of teaching activity within the community. In the current Five Year Plan, the efforts for expansion and consolidation in your community are unfolding in more than 600 clusters. Some of these clusters have advanced significantly to the third milestone, where a hundred or more active friends are engaging hundreds of participants, while other clusters have a program of growth that is still at an early stage of development. Overall, more than 40,000 individuals are participating in core activities, roughly two-thirds of whom are Bahá'ís. Within each cluster, an expanding nucleus of individuals reflect on their experience and learn over time to extend the scope and increase the effectiveness of their activities. From the foundation of this experience, the friends are well positioned

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to accelerate the movement of more and more clusters, multiply core activities, increase participation through outreach to the wider society, and strengthen the process of expansion and consolidation—including learning to increase the number of new believers.

Ultimately, then, any concern about the rate of enrollments, like any other practical challenge that arises in the process of community building, is in the first instance best addressed by the friends in light of their experience in their clusters, where circumstances, resources, approaches, challenges, activities, and results can be considered. Teaching is the sacred obligation of every believer. Whether in the course of their daily interactions with friends and colleagues or as part of a teaching team visiting neighbors or in efforts to help a receptive population take charge of its spiritual and material development, the friends are sharing the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh in a multitude of meaningful conversations about human nature and the advancement of society. Just as an individual finds that certain capabilities contribute to effective teaching, so too the friends in a single cluster can collectively ensure—through training and practical experience—that all the capacities necessary for effective action in the range of activities essential to progress are increasingly developed. Depending on experience and needs, learning and action in any given cycle may focus on pursuing specific objectives or resolving different challenges, such as how to engage receptive individuals or populations in elevated discussions that attract their interest, how to multiply core activities and increase participation, and, when timely, how to present the Faith effectively and invite a ready soul to embrace the Faith in a variety of settings, such as devotional gatherings, firesides, or home visits. It is in this context that the 29 December 2015 message of the House of Justice, in setting out the requirements of the current Plan, offered encouragement for the friends to "become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause." In cluster reflection gatherings and other settings, the friends have the opportunity to hear about the exploits of their co-workers in the Cause and learn from one another's experiences, always abstaining from the quixotic quest for formulaic solutions that results in the community lurching frenetically from one activity to another or from the kind of destructive criticism that prevents the search for solutions to challenges and only cools the desire to serve.

In the context of the activities in a cluster, the friends should appreciate certain distinct features of the approach to teaching in neighborhoods where the work is intensifying. Experience has demonstrated that, in many instances, when introducing community-building activities into a neighborhood or village, an approach that does not emphasize enrollment initially can allow for a wider

circle of participation. Where the implementation of core activities is accompanied with ongoing and rich conversations about associated Bahá'í teachings and the Person of Bahá'u'lláh, the influence of the Faith begins to permeate an ever-broader cross section of the population. Thus, in a natural and unobtrusive way, a wide array of individuals and families grow in their familiarity with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and the nature of His Mission. In their own lives and in the life of the community, they begin to witness and experience the transformation that comes from exposure to and interaction with the Word of God, including its practical application. In such settings, the ways in which individuals will advance in their relationship with the Faith will vary. There are some who, while appreciating the effect of the core activities on their personal lives and on the life of the community, approach them only as valuable efforts to better social conditions. For others, however, a close association with the Bahá'í community and an ever-deeper appreciation of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh evoke a profound love for and commitment to the Faith. Some may spontaneously request enrollment or readily respond to an invitation. Others, viewing themselves as completely at one with the Bahá'í community, might express the desire to join the Faith through eagerness to participate in the full range of Bahá'í activities, including those dimensions of community life that are only open to Bahá'ís, such as Nineteen Day Feasts, the Fund, or the electoral process.

The National Spiritual Assembly will lovingly and with deepest gratitude offer prayers in the sacred environs of the Mother Temple of the West for all those who are nobly pursuing the aims of the current Plan—in such a wide variety of settings—that they may ever be blessed and sustained in their patient, determined, and devoted efforts.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

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Kenneth E. Bowers
Secretary